



How to Rescue a Religious Hamster

BY RON
BENSON

We all know a couple of people caught in the hamster-wheel of religious legalism. They must keep on running just as fast as they can—performing all the required rituals, jumping through holy hoops—so they can prove how worthy they are to God and everybody else.

Maybe they're in a legalistic group that demands strict adherence to a set of rules, or maybe they've assumed a long list of regulations for their own performance trap. Maybe the pressure is inflicted from the outside, or perhaps from the inside. But we see the struggle, and we want to help them break free from the fortress of legalism. We have tasted the glory of grace, and we desperately want them to have the same flavor on their spiritual taste buds. But how?

Here are five approaches that may occur to you as ways to help your legalistic friend. *Don't try them.* (Once again, you may think of approaches like these, but **DON'T TRY THEM!**)

1) Send the victim of legalism threatening emails about damnation. Oh, and grace.

2) On a Wednesday night when your friend is required to be at church, break into the victim's

home and remove all their religious implements, documents, icons, statues, Ten Commandment plaques and the plastic box of verses on the kitchen table shaped like a miniature loaf of bread. Clean it all out. Leave a polite note and a copy of Galatians. (*Holy stealing*).

3) In symbolic drama (*a la* the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel) chain yourself to the posts on the victim's front porch. Have someone throw the key to your padlock

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in the river. When your legalistic friend notices you, explain that this is a picture of bondage and that you will not be released until she gives up her legalistic ways and accepts the grace of God. (You may want to have your helper bring some fried chicken. You're going to be there for a while.)

4) Do an intervention. Gather a dozen truly redeemed friends of the target legalist and show up at his house one evening at around 11:00 p.m. Make a pot of coffee. After getting the target out of bed, sit around the living room and take turns telling about how the target's legalistic ways are damaging you personally. Make stuff up, if necessary. (*Holy deceit*).

5) Parade your freedom in Christ in front of your religious friend. If she only wears long skirts, wear short ones. If he abstains from dancing, dance every night in your front yard. If they go to church every Sunday because they want to get in good with God, dance in your yard on Sunday mornings in a short skirt. (*Holy immodesty*).

I know you're not going to try these ideas. Right? Right.

But if you're like me, you may have tried others. I've tried arguing with friends about the grace of God and its power to set us free

from bondage. Arguing didn't work. I've tried giving them books from qualified authors about the amazing grace of God. They didn't read them. I've tried dragging them to a church where grace is preached, but they wouldn't go.

It's no surprise, when you think about it. If, for instance, I believe profoundly that piercing my ear and putting a safety pin through it will ensure I'm on God's good side, I'll do it. If you tell me to stop, I'll put a safety pin in the other ear. Why? Because I'm not about to lose God's blessing.

If our friends, neighbors and relatives believe that their actions, good works, stellar behavior and ritual-keeping will keep them out

of a burning hell and earn them entrance to heaven, why would they stop when I preach at them? They're not about to give up on the only thing they've got going that provides some semblance of security for their eternal future.

Don't fight. Don't argue. Don't harangue. Don't berate.

And don't give up on them.

Instead, bring them to God in prayer. Offer strategic prayer for their release from bondage. Here are three practical, positive, prayerful approaches—we encourage you to TRY THEM!

- Pray that God would bring them to the logical end of their thinking. In other words, ask him to let them see how futile it is to earn our way into God's love. Only God can show them the evidence, by his Spirit. If you try to do this yourself, it can build a resistance to grace.

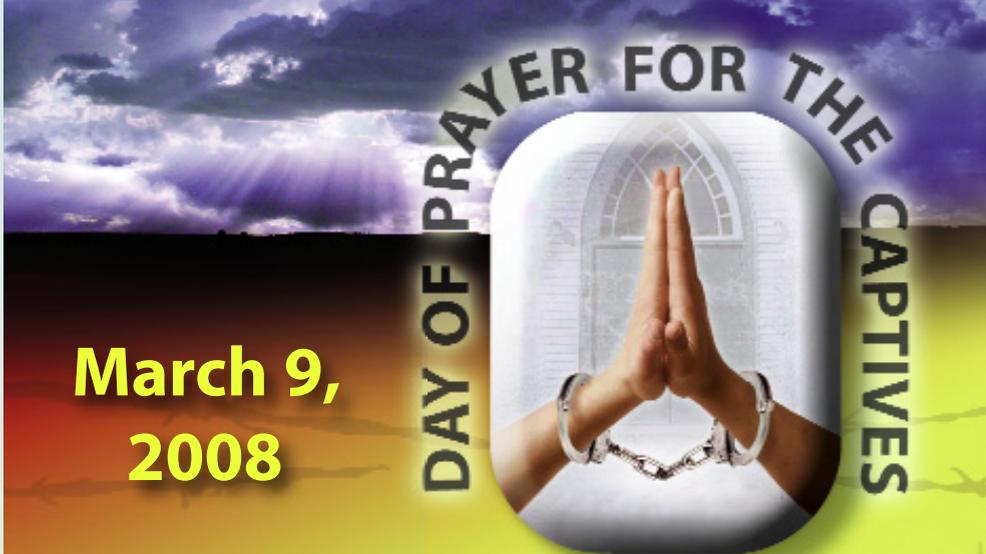
- Pray that God would open their eyes to see true freedom. Many people who are caught in the fortress of legalism stay there because they've never seen a window into God's grace. Ask God to reveal grace-living to them at every turn. Do your best to model grace, without shoving your freedom in their faces.

- Pray that God would help you be honest, open and loving toward them. If you've known freedom, it's hard to see someone chained up to religion. You want to shout at them, preach at them and manage their spiritual journeys. Don't try it. Instead, pray for patience, gentleness and practical love.

Though the Galatians spurred his anger because of their legalistic ways, the Apostle Paul still offered his love and his prayers. And he advised them, "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13).

Bring your legalistic friends before God in prayer. And love them into freedom. □

Ron Benson is a pastor and writer now living in Freeland, Michigan. You can warn Ron about the dangers of missing Wednesday night services at his website: www.ronbenson.net.



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2008

The majority of the world today lives under some form of religious oppression. Even now, thousands are being imprisoned, tortured or put to death for their faith. In the 20th century alone, it is estimated that 45 million people died for their Christian faith.

But a far more insidious form of religious oppression plagues millions of people. Most of the victims don't even know they are being oppressed—because this oppression is often self-imposed. Within Christendom millions live under the mistaken belief that their observance of religious rituals, regulations, rules, restrictions and routines will somehow make God more pleased with them. Often, these people are unaware that they are living under a burden. Until Someone begins to lift the weight from their shoulders, they don't know what a heavy load they've been carrying all their lives. That's why Plain Truth Ministries is dedicating Sunday, March 9th as a special day of prayer for the millions who are in the bonds of religious oppression and legalism.

What can you do? Join with Christian friends for a time of prayer. Pray for someone you know who is a slave to religious legalism. If you're in a small group, make it a point to meet on that day and pray for religious captives. Tell your pastor. Email your Christian friends and let them know.

Take some time right now to visit our website and read the resources we've posted about the Day of Prayer for the Captives.

For more details go to
www.ptm.org/DPC



ONLINE INTERVIEW
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Join Greg Albrecht as he talks with Pastor Ron Benson for more insights about 1) How not to rescue a legalist and 2) Why prayer is the most effective way to help someone held in religious bondage.

FREE Booklet from
Plain Truth Ministries

Does prayer
work?

What is prayer anyway? Is it just another religious ritual we endure? Is it something we have to do to keep God happy? What if you didn't pray before a meal—would you be in deep *do-do* with God? And why do we only "say grace" before a meal—why not pray before we go to the movies, to a concert or to a baseball game? Is prayer all about persuading God to do something that he is reluctant to do?

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